DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 675 EA 028 575

AUTHOR Glassford, Larry A.
TITLE Linking the Status Quo to a Better Future: The Socio-political Environment for Ontario Secondary School Teachers and Its Implications for Policy Change.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Change; Foreign Countries; *Policy Formation; Program Implementation; Resistance to Change; Secondary Education; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Participation
IDENTIFIERS *Ontario

ABSTRACT

Some educators view change as a positive process producing desirable improvements; others perceive it as a threatening force producing disruption and conflict. This paper presents findings of a study that examined whether changes in teachers' work lives affected teachers' attitudes toward educational change, and whether the resulting attitudes affected the degree of teachers' engagement with the change implementation. Interviews were conducted with 9 principals and 45 teachers in 9 secondary schools in southwestern Ontario, where grades 7-9 were undergoing a move toward "downstreaming," or outcomes-based education. Teachers involved in planning, implementing, and monitoring the change process and principals reported positive attitudes; however, teachers not involved in the process expressed negative attitudes. The research appears to support the following generalizations concerning the successful implementation of educational change: (1) the proposed change must be good, and must be seen to be good, by those who are to implement it; (2) the implementers must be given the tools to do the job; and (3) although overall direction and coordination should come from the top down, room for initiative, creativity, and individualization must always be left for those who will ultimately decide the fate of the change "in the trenches"--the classroom teachers. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 410 675

LINKING THE STATUS QUO TO A BETTER FUTURE:

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

- by Larry A. Glassford

Faculty of Education

University of Windsor

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association (AERA)

Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois: March, 1997

EA028575

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Glassford

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Linking the Status Quo to a Better Future:
The Socio-Political Environment for Ontario Secondary School Teachers,
and its Implications for Policy Change

(Part One of: "Perceptions of Ontario Secondary School Teachers of Effects of Educational Change on their Professional Work Life" - A series of Roundtable Sessions)

A. The General Study

Nine principals and 45 teachers in nine secondary schools - both urban and suburban - in southwestern Ontario (London-Chatham-Windsor) were interviewed by the research team, in semi-structured one-to-one sessions of up to an hour in length, to elicit their views on the impact of educational change on their professional work life. The working hypothesis of the study was that changes in the dynamics of teachers' work lives would affect the dispositions teachers held towards educational change, and that the resulting attitudes would bear strongly on the degree to which teachers would actively engage in implementing the proposed changes.

B. Background Theory

Some educators view change as a positive process producing desirable improvements; others perceive it as a threatening force producing disruption and conflict. Yet educational systems are constantly changing, frequently through a series of evolutionary adaptations, sometimes in more dramatic fashion - whether planned or unplanned. One school of thought, more prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, has stressed that in order for major planned change to be successful, a bottom-up approach that involves classroom teachers and provides them with a sense of ownership, is the key to successful implementation. Another school, attracting more attention in the 1980s and 1990s, has shifted the emphasis to a top-down and even external leadership approach, as the most critical factor for the success of planned change. (For more elaboration, see Jeanne H. Ballantine, The Sociology of Education: A Systematic Analysis, Prentice-Hall, 1997, especially pp. 362-379).

C. Focus of This Presentation

A majority of both principals and teachers in our southwestern Ontario study of secondary schools selected one particular cluster of government-initiated reforms as the particular educational change which had had the greatest effect upon their own work life in the past five years. This change was variously referred to as "Transition Years," "destreaming," "Common Curriculum," or "outcomes-based education." By whatever name they used, these educators were referring to a package of school reforms announced by the Ontario government's Ministry of Education on June 15, 1992, with implementation to begin no later than September, 1993, and full implementation to be accomplished within three years of that date. The key aspects of the new policy, as far as secondary schools were concerned, were laid out as follows:

1. The program for Grades 7, 8, and 9 shall be organized according to core learning outcomes.
2. No credits shall be assigned to the program offered in Grade 9. (Note: this meant that the students' whole Grade 9 program would be judged either Pass or Fail).
3. The Grade 9 program shall no longer be organized according to levels of difficulty. (Note: no more Advanced, General, and Basic levels).

The interviews with teachers and principals for this research study were conducted in 1995-96,

during the midst of the three-year implementation period specified by the provincial Ministry of Education. Evidently these mandated reforms had an impact, for a majority of both types of respondents selected this series of Grade 9 initiatives as the most important change in their own work life. Consequently, my presentation will focus on those responses - 5 of 9 principals, and 24 of 45 teachers, in the larger study - which dealt with the Ministry-mandated Grade 9 reforms.

D. The Socio-Political Environment in Ontario

Ontario, it has been said, has a "progressive-conservative" political culture. The province dates its founding to the emigration of United Empire Loyalists in the 1780s, fleeing persecution in the newly independent United States of America. These Tory roots were supplemented by largely British immigrants throughout the 19th century. Only since 1945 has the WASPish face and voice of Ontario been significantly altered by the influx of peoples from southern and eastern Europe, south and east Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America. For 42 years, from 1943 to 1985, Ontario was governed by a Progressive Conservative (PC) party that managed to reassure traditional elements of the population, while transforming the public institutional structure of the province in a series of gradual steps. Only in 1985, when a retiring Premier unexpectedly committed his successors to full public funding of Catholic secondary-school education, was the Tory consensus shattered, and the PC party defeated. Yet both Opposition parties endorsed the full funding policy, and in the ensuing decade, first the Liberals, and then the New Democrats, each had five years in office. The pace of educational change quickened, but did not significantly deviate from the broad parameters established over at least the preceding quarter century by their Progressive Conservative predecessors.

E. The Ontario Educational System

The taxpayers of Ontario publicly fund two school systems, the so-called public system, and the Roman Catholic separate system. Local school boards generally coincide with city and county boundaries (although this is slated to change in 1997, with a move to bigger boards). Most boards have elementary schools which extend from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8, and secondary schools which offer Grades 9 to 12, as well as a series of Ontario Academic Credit (OAC) courses which function as an informal Grade 13. (Until recently, Grade 13 was officially a part of secondary school education). A few jurisdictions have either senior elementary schools (Grade 7 and 8), or junior high schools (Grade 7-9). Since the 1960s, Ontario's secondary schools have offered three streams of education: a Basic program leading directly to unskilled or semi-skilled employment; a General program leading to employment or technical training at community colleges; and an Advanced program leading to college or university.

F. Social and Economic Change in Ontario

Ontario has not been immune to the forces of globalization. Canada's entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement, and its support of the World Trade Organization, mean that Ontario's industries face the constant need for modernization and innovation. The information revolution continues apace, as computers and telecommunication become ever more accessible. The normal demographic pattern of aging baby-boomers is made more complex in Ontario by the steady influx of migrants - from other Canadian provinces, and from outside Canada's borders. This factor alone accounts for a population growth averaging one million people per decade, in a province numbering some 12 million in 1997. Furthermore, population

growth is focused on the larger cities of southern Ontario, and in particular the Toronto-centred "Golden Horseshoe," around the west end of Lake Ontario.

Serious constitutional conflicts threaten the viability of the Canadian federation, while a century of neglect of the First Nations has produced a volatile situation with regard to Native rights. Federal deficit-cutting has drastically reduced transfer payments to provincial coffers for education, health, and social welfare programs. Meanwhile, opinion polls have begun to track an apparent rightward swing in the ideological attitudes of Ontarians, away from social equality and in the direction of personal liberty. Unemployment has hovered at an unacceptably high 10% or more throughout the decade of the 90s. Parents, and prospective employers, demand that the schools provide the training needed so that graduating students will have the job qualifications required for, and relevant to, the 21st century.

G. Aims of the Ministry's Educational Reforms

The series of Grade 9 initiatives cited by the interviews for this research study were part of a larger reform package designed to modernize the Ontario school curriculum, and promote greater educational opportunity for students. Specifically, the Transition Years (Grades 7-9) were identified as a critical juncture, where students were undergoing major personal changes - physical, emotional, and social - at the same time that they were required to make a vital career decision, namely, which academic stream to pursue in Grade 9. While the credit system in secondary schools was originally designed to permit students to move between streams, two decades of experience had shown that very little of this inter-stream mobility actually happened. Students generally were labelled as, and saw themselves fitting into, one of these categories: Basic, General, or Advanced. Furthermore, research studies had shown that enrolment in the three streams was as apt to relate to socio-economic class and ethno-cultural background, as it was to apparent learning capacity.

The previous Liberal government initiated the re-examination of high school streaming in 1989. Under the New Democrats (NDP) this review culminated in the policy announcement of June 15, 1992. In addition to moving the commencement of streaming to Grade 10, (hence the "destreaming" of Grade 9), the NDP government issued a "Common Curriculum" for Grades 1 to 9, based on the achievement of a large number of learning outcomes. Teachers, schools and school boards were encouraged to utilize subject-integrated curriculum wherever possible. This latter initiative made little difference up to Grade 6, for integrated curricular instruction had been commonplace in those years for more than a decade. It was new for some subjects in Grades 7 and 8, where most schools employed a "rotary" system of specialized teachers for half or more of the curriculum. In Grade 9, the threatened blurring or disappearance of subject boundaries seemed almost revolutionary. The sub-culture of Ontario high schools has been built on subject-based departments and teacher specialists for most of this century. The combination of Grade 9 destreaming and curriculum integration made the Transition Years initiative a hot topic in high school staff rooms right across the province.

H. The Response of Secondary School Principals

Out of the five interviewed principals (from a total of 9 schools) who designated the "Transition Years" as the most significant change in their work lives over the previous five years, two indicated that they felt "positive" about the change, two felt "somewhat positive" about it, and one was neutral , believing it was generally "negative" for the students, but

"positive" for educators. None circled "very positive," "somewhat negative," "negative," or "very negative." With the notable exception of the neutral individual, the principals seemed to believe the Grade 9 changes were sincerely intended by the Ministry of Education to benefit the students, and, if properly implemented, would actually improve their educational experience. Other reasons they gave for feeling positive about the change included: the creative input, collaborative teamwork and sheer effort contributed by supportive teachers; the positive relationship developed with "feeder" elementary-school principals, fellow secondary principals, parents, and senior Board administrators; the information and training derived from professional development workshops; and the opportunity to provide leadership for a worthwhile reform.

Despite their generally positive reaction, the principals did note several negative factors that detracted from the overall success of the Transition Years initiative. These included: resistance from some teachers, many of whom were already either frightened, or resentful, of province-wide budgetary cutbacks; "turf protection" by some subject departments, and occasionally by Board administrators; inadequate funding; inadequate staff training; insufficient time for planning and implementation; and overall staff fatigue and stress. These principals seemed to prefer change scenarios where they were consulted prior to final decision-making; where it was possible to provide their teachers with a rationale for change, timely information and training, and adequate lead-time for implementation; and where Board administrators were supportive but not intrusive.

1. The Response of Secondary School Teachers

Among the 45 teachers from nine schools who were interviewed, 24 selected the "Transition Years," "destreaming," the "Common Curriculum," or "outcomes-based evaluation" as the most significant change affecting their work lives over the previous five years. This cluster of responses all referred to the package of Ministry reforms to Grade 9, mandated for implementation beginning no later than September 1993. By a majority of 15 to 9, they reported their experience to have been negative rather than positive. The full breakdown was as follows: Very Positive - 1; Positive - 3; Somewhat Positive - 5; Somewhat Negative - 9; Negative - 5; Very Negative - 1.

The reasons given to support the negative reaction tended to cluster around a few general factors. While no teacher declared himself or herself to be personally opposed to all change, a few of the proponents of the initiative did attribute this motive to significant numbers of their resistant colleagues. Many of our interviewees did forthrightly declare their opposition to this particular reform package, however. Destreaming, they believed, held back the more academically gifted, while it frustrated the more academically challenged. Discipline problems, they reported, had noticeably increased. Curriculum integration, they felt, was out of place in a secondary-school setting organized around subject specialization. The constant formative assessment needed to implement outcomes-based evaluation merely added to the teacher's heavy workload, already strained by the larger class sizes forced by budgetary cutbacks. In short, these teachers' experience with the Transition Years initiative confirmed, to their satisfaction, what they had predicted beforehand - it was a bad idea.

Another set of objections centred upon the change process. The Ministry announcement in June, 1992, while not entirely unexpected by the province's educational elites, came like a lightning bolt from a clear blue sky to most classroom teachers in Ontario. This was no position paper to which individuals and groups could give input; it was a statement of policy, for prompt

implementation. Yet the pilot projects which had been initiated by the preceding Liberal government had not been operating long enough to provide more than anecdotal data. Furthermore, the supporting documents supplied by the Ministry seemed, in the minds of many veteran teachers , to minimize and ridicule the very methods they had been using, and using very successfully, for many years.

In the context of provincial funding cutbacks, symbolized by the imposition in 1993 of a "social contract" that froze new hiring and rolled back teacher salaries, the environment for top-down innovation was not propitious. Feeling no ownership of a change many of them already believed would be harmful to themselves and their students, many teachers reported further dismay at the evident lack of preparation by the ministry. There were no new textbooks ready, and precious few other available learning resources geared to the new curriculum. Just when professional development workshops were most needed, funding cutbacks prevented Boards from making more than a token effort at staff in-servicing. As one teacher reported, it was "change on the fly," with very little Ministry guidance. Tempers frayed; stress levels soared; fatigue and burnout took their toll.

The wonder is that four out of five principals reported their experience with implementing the Transition Years changes had been positive. A clue to this mystery is found in the minority of interviewed teachers who also reported positive experiences. Virtually all of them reported having been given the opportunity to serve on some form of implementation committee, whether within their own school, or at a Board-side level. This involvement in planning brought with it greater exposure to information supporting the reforms, and more chance for meaningful input into the implementation. These teachers also reported an increased workload, but the added effort seemed to pay off in a closer working relationship with professional colleagues, and greater classroom success in using the new approaches. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the costs of this heightened involvement was a greater distance between themselves and their non-involved colleagues, most of whom continued to oppose the reforms. The teachers who reported a positive experience frequently cited a supportive attitude from administration, both at the Board level and, more importantly, within the school. Teachers on both sides of the fence mentioned the need for meaningful feedback, once the process of change implementation had been initiated. As expected, those receiving support, praise, and constructive suggestions felt more positively than those facing only the incredulity, even hostility, of mystified students, parents and colleagues.

In short, those teachers who were involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the change reported similar positive responses, and for similar reasons, as did most of the principals, likewise involved in the implementation process from the outset.

J. Implications for Future Policy Change

This research study seems to support the following generalizations concerning the successful implementation of educational change:

1. The proposed change must be good, and must be seen to be good, by those who are to implement it. Rather than over-dramatizing a radical shift from all previous misguided methods to a guaranteed utopia, sincere reformers would do better to emphasize points of continuity between the status quo and their vision of a better future.

2. The implementers must be given the tools to do the job: time, funds, research information, new learning resources and materials. Meaningful involvement on planning committees

heightens a sense of commitment among teachers who may sway their colleagues to a more accepting attitude toward the change.

3. While overall direction and coordination should come from the top down, room for initiative, creativity and individualization must always be left for those who will ultimately decide the fate of the change "in the trenches": the classroom teachers.

None of this is particularly new. The wonder is that educational policy-makers continue to make the same blunders, time after time.